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EPA Proposes to Remove Toxic Waste Near San Jacinto River

by [Jim Malewitz](#)

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Federal regulators have a plan to remove toxic waste that has festered for more than half a century near the San Jacinto River in Harris County.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Wednesday proposed to remove 202,000 cubic yards of dioxins and other pollutants from a 14-acre site along Interstate 10 east of Houston, which has long stirred environmental and health concerns. The projected price tag is \$97 million.

Five years ago, the companies responsible for the waste installed a temporary cap that sought to contain the sludge. But that armored structure has occasionally needed repairs — including a significant fix after [divers found a 20-foot hole in it](#) last December.

“Based on the recommendation of EPA site managers and the on-going maintenance and repairs of the temporary cap, we are proposing to remove contaminated material and provide the community with the most protective cleanup plan for the San Jacinto waste pits site,” Ron Curry, an EPA regional administrator, said in a statement.

The agency will take public comments through Nov. 28 before finalizing the plan.

Local environmental groups cheered the announcement Wednesday.

“It looks really good,” said Bob Stokes, president of the Galveston Bay Foundation, as he was still reading the proposal. “Now, the issue is to ensure that the engineering plans and on-the-ground actions that take this waste away are as tight as possible.”

U.S. Rep. [Gene Green](#), D-Houston, who long pushed to remove the waste, called the announcement “a relief.”

“The regulatory process works,” he said in an interview. “Galveston Bay is so important for both industrial, but also recreational and fishing that we need to clean this up.”

But the plan drew some criticism.

“What EPA is proposing to do is the riskiest of the two solutions,” Thomas Knickerbocker, an attorney for San Jacinto Citizens Against Pollution, said Wednesday. His citizen group instead calls for the waste to stay put, and be secured by a permanent cap — so as not to disturb long-settled contaminants.

The San Jacinto River and waterways it feeds into, like Galveston Bay, are tainted with a wide variety of chemicals that likely came from many different industrial operations. In

recent years regulators have traced some of the most noxious pollution to the partially submerged in question — where wastewater from a now-shuttered paper mill was dumped into Houston-area waters beginning in 1965.

Decades ago, environmental rules were more lenient and no one knew the wastewater held dioxin, now known to be highly toxic and carcinogenic.

Long-term exposure to dioxin, a component of [Agent Orange, the herbicide that devastated countrysides during the Vietnam War](#), can [lead](#) to severe reproductive and developmental problems. In the short term, dioxin exposure can cause skin and liver problems, as well as nausea and vomiting.

Discovered in 2005 and added as an EPA Superfund site in 2008, the San Jacinto pits have spurred litigation and years of debate about how best to clean them up.

In 2014, lawyers for Harris County and the state [won](#) a \$29.2 million settlement from McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corp. and Houston-based Waste Management Inc. related to the pollution — money that's been used to improve communities near the site.

Another defendant, International Paper Co., escaped penalties in the lawsuit, but Harris County is appealing that decision.

Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan called the EPA's announcement Wednesday "good news."

Removing the waste carries some risks, such as the potential to stir up some of the contaminants, which do not dissolve in water.

That's what San Jacinto Citizens Against Pollution fears, and it argues that building a permanent cap would prove cheaper than hauling away the pollution. Knickerbocker pointed to a [U.S. Army Corps of Engineers study](#) that suggested that removing the waste could prove riskier than letting it sit.

But a host of local officials and environmental groups say the best option is to remove the waste but to do so carefully.

"This is not going to be 100 percent clean," said Stokes, of the Galveston Bay Foundation. "There is some risk in taking this away, but we felt like the risk of leaving it in place is greater, certainly, in the much longer term."